

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-11

INFO OCT-01 IO-13 ISO-00 SSM-03 ACDA-12 OMB-01 DOE-15
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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
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INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 3461

E.O. 11652: XGDS-4
TAGS: PEPR, SY, LE, US, IS
SUBJ: SYRIA BEYOND THE LITANI?

1. AP JOURNALIST LOUIS FARES, WHO MAINTAINS TIES TO SYRIA
INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES, ASKED POLOFF ON JUNE 15 WHAT US ATTITUDE
WOULD BE TOWARD A SYRIAN TROOP MOVEMENT TO THE AREA BELOW
THE LITANI RIVER. FARES ARGUED THAT EVENTS IN LEBANON HAD
PROVED THAT THE COUNTRY COULD NEVER RESTORE SECURITY UNTIL
SYRIAN TROOPS WERE STATIONED THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. FARES
EXPRESSED SKEPTICISM THAT THE LEBANESE ARMY WOULD ANY TIME
SOON BE UP TO THE TASK. HE ARGUED THAT AS MATTERS NOW STOOD
THERE WAS LITTLE INCENTIVE FOR SYRIA TO SEND ITS TROOPS TO
THE LITANI. HE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT ASSAD WAS CONSIDERING SUCH
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A MOVE BUT CLAIMED THAT HIS MILITARY ADVISORS, INCLUDING
COS SHAHABI, WERE ADVISING HIM AGAINST IT. THEY WERE UN-
HAPPY ABOUT THE DANGERS CONTINUING INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON
POSED TO THE SYRIAN ARMED FORCES AND REALIZED THAT ANY
MOVE TO THE LITANI WOULD REQUIRE A LARGE INCREASE IN SYRIAN
FORCES PRESENT IN LEBANON. YET, A MOVE TO THE LITANI WOULD
STILL LEAVE MANY PALESTINIANS AND RIGHTWING MILITIAMEN BEYOND

SYRIA'S GRASP. A SYRIAN PRESENCE ON THE LITANI ALSO CARRIED THE RISK THAT ISRAEL OR PLO REJECTIONISTS COULD PROVOKE A WAR WITH SYRIA ANY TIME THEY CHOSE.

2. ON THE OTHER HAND, FARES CLAIMED THAT A MOVE TO A LINE JUST NORTH OF THE ISRAELI BORDER WITH CONCENTRATED UNIFIL FORCES POLICING A THIN BUFFER ZONE ALA UNDOF WOULD PROVE MORE TEMPTING TO THE SYRIANS. WHILE FARES CONCEDED THAT THIS WOULD REQUIRE A MUCH GREATER INCREASE IN SYRIAN FORCES THAN A MOVE TO THE LITANI, THE PAYOFF WOULD BE WORTH IT. BY HAVING A PRESENCE THROUGHOUT LEBANON, THE SYRIANS WOULD BE IN A POSITION TO CONTROL ALL PALESTINIAN GROUPS AND PREVENT ATTACKS ON ISRAEL SUCH AS FATAH'S OPERATION ON THE HAIFA-TEL AVIV ROAD WHICH GAVE ISRAEL THE PRETEXT IT NEEDED TO INVADE SOUTH LEBANON. SUCH CONTROL WOULD ALSO REMOVE THE ARGUMENTS OF THE LEBANESE FRONT FOR MAINTAINING ARMED MILITIAS. SYRIA COULD THEN EFFECTIVELY GET ON WITH THE TASK OF RE-BUILDING LEBANON AND REMOVING ITS TROOPS FROM THE COUNTRY. FARES ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THE PALESTINIANS MIGHT FIGHT MORE DETERMINEDLY THAN THEY DID WHEN SYRIA FIRST ENTERED LEBANON IN 1976 BUT CLAIMED THAT THE ULTIMATE GOAL WOULD MAKE SUCH RISKS TOLERABLE FOR THE SYRIANS. HE SAID THAT ANY SUCH MOVE ALSO WOULD BRING TREMENDOUS PRESSURE FROM REJECTIONIST ARAB STATES AND THE SOVIET UNION. SYRIA WOULD HAVE TO HAVE FULL US BACKING AND GUARANTEES TO INCUR SUCH RISKS.

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3. FARES WAS CAUTIONED THAT THERE WAS NO SIGNAL THAT ISRAEL WAS READY EVEN TO COUNTERANCE A SYRIAN MOVE TO THE LITANI, LET ALONE FURTHER. POLOFF INFORMED HIM THAT SYRIAN CONTROL OVER THE AREA BETWEEN THE ZAHRANI AND LITANI RIVERS COULD BE VERY CONSTRUCTIVE IF IT LED TO THE CONTROL OF ILLEGAL ARMED ELEMENTS IN THE AREA BUT THAT CONSIDERABLE PRIOR COORDINATION WOULD BE NECESSARY TO MAKE ANY SUCH MOVE FEASIBLE. FARES ACKNOWLEDGED THE POINT BUT SAID THAT WHAT MAY BE IMPOSSIBLE NOW MIGHT CHANGE IN SOME MONTHS, NOTING THAT ISRAEL INITIALLY OPPOSED ANY SYRIAN ENTRY INTO LEBANON BUT BY JUNE OF 1976 ACQUIESCED IN A LIMITED SYRIAN PRESENCE AND SCOPE OF OPERATION. EVEN IF SHIHABI AND OTHER MILITARY LEADERS WERE AGAINST A MOVE TO THE LITANI, THEY WOULD EXECUTE ANY DECISION ASSAD TOOK ON THE MATTER.

4. COMMENT: FARES HAD ASKED POLOFF TO COME TO HIS OFFICE FOR THE SOLE PURPOSE OF PRESENTING THESE IDEAS AND HEARING WHAT HIS REACTION TO THEM MIGHT BE. WHILE FARES OFTEN EMBELLISHES HIS PRESENTATIONS, HE PROBABLY WAS ASKING THESE QUESTIONS AT BEHEST OF ONE OF HIS SYRIAN INTELLIGENCE CONTACTS. FARES AND OTHERS WE TALK TO HERE LEAVE US WITH THE IMPRESSION THAT AN EVENTUAL SYRIAN MOVE TO THE LITANI

MIGHT BE POSSIBLE BUT THAT SYRIAN LEADERSHIP IS WARY OF
THE COST AND RISKS.
PELLETREAU

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